

**Testimony of Bishop H. David Burton**  
**Presiding Bishop**  
**The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints**  
**Before the**  
**House Resources Subcommittee on National Parks and Public Lands**  
**On**  
**H.R. 4103, the Martin's Cove Land Transfer Act**  
**May 16, 2002**  
**Washington, D.C.**

**Introduction**

Chairman Radanovich, Chairman Hansen and members of the Committee, I am Bishop H. David Burton. I serve as the Presiding Bishop for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In this capacity, under the direction of the First Presidency of the Church, I supervise and manage all of the physical properties of the worldwide Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints of over eleven million members. I appreciate the invitation to appear before this you today to testify in support of H. R. 4103, the Martin's Cove Land Transfer Act.

I want to thank Chairman Hansen and all the other members of Congress who have cosponsored this bill. I also want to thank Congresswoman Barbara Cubin of Wyoming for agreeing to listen to our interest in protecting, preserving and providing public understanding of what occurred at Martin's Cove. We are also most grateful for Subcommittee field hearing in Casper, Wyoming on May 4.

In order for to understand why Martin's Cove is such a sacred location to the Latter-day Saint people and to our Church, I must tell you the saga of the Martin and Willie Handcart companies of Mormon pioneers. As shown in the PBS television documentary, "Trail of Hope," a portion of which was shown to the Committee this morning, this is a story of dedication, determination and death; a story of suffering and selfless sacrifice; and above all, a story of great faith. The courage and sacrifice of these marooned pioneers in 1856 and their rescuers is one of the great heroic stories of the American pioneer era.

**The Great Western Migration**

Most of the Great Western migration took place during a period of a little over twenty years. In that time some 350,000 people came along the Oregon, California and Mormon trails. Roughly one-sixth, or over 60,000, of those going west were members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Early Latter-day Saints experienced considerable persecution and were driven from place to place before finally building a great city on the Mississippi River in Illinois called Nauvoo. It was from Nauvoo, after much persecution there, that the first of Mormon pioneers started west in 1846. The early migration was mostly by wagon although later on some 3,000 poorer emigrants traveled by handcart.

The Oregon, California and Mormon trails started in the frontier cities of the Mid-West, followed the Platte and North Platte rivers through Nebraska into Wyoming near present day Casper, then dropped down to the Sweetwater River in Wyoming near Independence Rock. Since these travelers needed water for their animals and people, it was the rivers that dictated their route. About seventy miles west of Martin's Cove, near South Pass, at what has come to be known as the Parting of the Ways, the various trails split up<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> some pioneers going to California for gold, some to Oregon for free land, and some hoping for a new and more prosperous life. The Mormons were following the direction of their prophet-leader, Brigham Young, to gather in the Great Salt Lake Valley and later settle much of the Intermountain West.

The early pioneer members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints began their trek westward to the Great Basin in the winter of 1846, crossing their wagons on the frozen Mississippi even as their homes, farms and property were being taken. During the cold winter, the Latter-day Saints made their way across Iowa territory to a staging ground which they called Winter Quarters, near present-day Council Bluffs on the Missouri River. Many were ill prepared and suffered much. At Winter Quarters the Latter-

day Saints built cabins, planted crops, and prepared to make the thousand-mile journey west. The first of the group arrived in Salt Lake City during July of 1847.

### **The Martin and Willie Handcart Companies**

In these migrations, one special story stands out. It is the story of the handcart pioneers, poor people with few frontier skills, who pushed and pulled handcarts some 1,300 miles between Iowa City and Salt Lake City. By 1856, hundreds of new converts to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the British Isles and Denmark wanted to join with the body of the church in Salt Lake City. Many pioneers lacked the means to make the journey without help. To help meet their needs, Brigham Young organized the Perpetual Emigration Fund to provide money for ship and overland passage for the poor immigrants in return for work or repayment after journey's end.

In addition, Brigham Young proposed that handcarts be used instead of costlier covered wagons pulled by a team of oxen. The shallow box on the handcart carried supplies, personal belongings and sometimes young children. Most handcarts carried a little over a hundred pounds, although some loads were heavier. Each traveler was allowed only 17 pounds of personal belongings including bedding and clothing. There would be one oxen supply wagon for every 20 handcarts which carried tents, flour, and other provisions, as well as those too sick or unable to walk.

The handcart companies averaged 15 miles per day. Handcarts were much less expensive and actually faster than oxen pulled wagons. Four or five people were assigned to each handcart. The first of three handcart companies sailed in March/April from England, picked up their handcarts at the end of the railroad in Iowa and arrived in Salt Lake City by early September. It was not an easy 1300-mile trek but they did it. Of ten total handcart companies, eight came through safely. Two did not.

The plan for travel was for the people to leave England by boat starting in mid February but not later than mid April. After arriving in the United States it took about five weeks to get to the Missouri River. Then it was a three-month trek to Salt Lake via handcarts. That schedule would put the travelers into the Salt Lake Valley no later than the end of September.

The Willie and the Martin immigrant companies started late from England and arrived in Iowa in mid-summer. Despite warnings about the perils of getting a late start, these immigrant pioneers, who had already traveled thousands of miles by ship, voted to press on to Utah. The Willie Company, with over 400 people left Iowa on July 15, 1856. The Martin company, with somewhere between 570 to 620 people, and the two trailing wagon trains captained by William Hodgetts and Daniel Hunt left about two weeks later.

These companies endured harrowing circumstances. By the time they were in Wyoming it was October. An early snowstorm developed into a bitter windswept blizzard and the temperatures dropped to 11 degrees below zero with wind chill conditions of from fifty to seventy degrees below zero. Oxen were lost in the storms; and even their cattle began to die from starvation. Their problems became critical as they were making the last crossing of the North Platte River near present day Casper. They were short of fuel, food, and adequate clothing. Rain and sleet turned to snow and ice. Rations were reduced to only 4 ounces of flour per day for adults, half that for children. The Willie Company was one week ahead of the Martin Company isolated near Sweetwater Station, west of Jeffrey City. The Martin Company was stranded at Red Buttes, unable to press forward.

### **“Bring Them In From the Plains”**

Brigham Young did not know that all these people had started west so late in the season until some returning missionaries, who had passed the pioneers on the plains, reported to him on the evening of Saturday, October 4, 1856. That was the night before the Church's General Conference or assembly. In the General Conference the next morning, Brigham Young said, “The theme of this conference will be the rescue of these saints. We must send assistance. We must bring them in from the plains.”

Food and clothing were gathered from among the people who themselves had little to spare. Horses, mules and wagons were donated and young men left their homes and families to volunteer for the rescue. On the morning of October 7, 1856, twenty-two teams<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>two spans to a wagon<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>started out to rescue the Willie and Martin handcart people. By Tuesday, 14 wagons of what would become 200 rescue wagons left the city. On October 19, 1856 the rescue party had reached South Pass where they camped for relief from

the severe storm. However, they had sent messengers ahead to notify the handcart companies that help was on the way. These messengers met the Willie Company west of Ice Slough. They gave them encouragement, and continued to Devil's Gate.

The Willie Company managed to continue to a location near the Sixth Crossing of the Sweetwater where they were joyously met two days later by the rescue wagons under the direction of George D. Grant. Grant left six wagons with the Willie Company then continued east along the trail with his remaining eight wagons. Arriving at Devil's Gate he sent three new rescue messengers east along the trail where they finally located the Martin Company at the Red Buttes where they were camped following their last crossing of the North Platte River near present day Casper. They had suffered terribly there in the storm.

The rescue messengers were able to get the Martin Handcart Company and the Hodgetts and Hunt wagon trains moving west along the trail. The Martin Handcart Company was met by the rescue wagons at Greasewood (Horse) Creek and brought to an abandoned fort at Devil's Gate. Since the fort was small and would not accommodate so many, the handcart pioneers were moved to a more sheltered area abutting the rocky cliffs west of the fort, now called Martin's Cove, where they remained in the open for four days and five nights. Before entering the Cove, over fifty had died. While in Martin's Cove, many more died. They did their best to cover the dead with rocks or bury them in frozen ground that was almost impenetrable. You can understand why the Latter-day Saints consider Martin's Cove so sacred. About November 12<sup>th</sup> they filled their wagons with the weakest emigrants and moved on. More deaths occurred.

The further West they went, the more rescue wagons they met and by the time they arrived at Ft. Bridger, Wyoming all were in a wagon. By late November they arrived in Salt Lake City. Brigham Young told the Latter-day Saints that those people would be helped better "with a cooked potato with a little salt and a little butter than all your prayers. Go and take them into your homes and nurse them back to health." And they did.

There were many heroic efforts connected with the rescue effort. Several young men from Salt Lake City spent much of one day wading back and forth across the Sweetwater river carrying people through the icy waters to get them into Martin's Cove.

Ephraim Hanks started out on the rescue trail alone, killed a buffalo shortly before reaching the Martin Company at the Cove, and was able to bring them badly needed food. Then he used his considerable frontier medical skills and a pair of scissors to treat the people's frost bitten and frozen limbs.

Although the exact number of those who perished cannot be precisely known, most historians agree that during the overland portion of their journey, 29 members of the Hunt and Hodgetts wagon companies died. The Willie Handcart Company lost 69 and the Martin Company suffered close to 170 deaths.

Some were critical of the decision of the handcart companies to come west so late in the year. Many years later, Francis Webster then an old man, one who had made the trip, declared, "I was in that company and my wife was in it--- we suffered beyond anything you can imagine and many died of exposure and starvation---we became acquainted with God in our extremities." He also told of looking ahead to see a spot on the trail and saying, "I can pull the handcart only that far." Then when he got to that point his cart started pushing him. It was then that he said he knew God and angels were helping push. Then he said, "Was I sorry that I chose to come by handcart? No, neither then nor one moment of my life since. The price we paid to become acquainted with God was a privilege to pay and I am thankful that I was privileged to come ... in the Martin Handcart Company."

The individual stories told from journals of the survivors and the roughly 200 who died from their ordeal are at once tragic, touching and triumphant. From that time to this, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have found inspiration from the stories of faith, dedication, sacrifice and suffering of the Willie and Martin Handcart companies in Wyoming.

### **Purchase of the Sun Ranch**

In mid 1996 the Church contracted to acquire the Hub and Spoke portion of the Sun Ranch along the Sweetwater River. May I take a moment to tell you a little bit about this historic ranch and give you some background about why and how we came to own it. The ranch begins at approximately Devils Gate and extends five to six miles west along the river. The strategic value of the ranch is its access to the sacred ground of Martin's Cove. The Oregon, California, Mormon and Pony Express trails go right through the

heart of this ranch. It remains a working cattle ranch today.

An easement from the Sun family to the historical sites of the Hub and Spoke ranch permitted the Church early access to the ranch pending the trade by the Sun Family for ranching properties elsewhere. In anticipation of substantial numbers of visitors for the 1997 Sesquicentennial Celebration of the first Mormon Pioneer trek across the plains, a development plan was created hurriedly to establish facilities to accommodate visitors and to properly interpret the site.

### **BLM Cooperative Agreement**

In 1997, a five-year cooperative agreement was entered into with the BLM, which permits the Church access from the privately held Sun Ranch properties north into Martin's Cove. This agreement provides for "historical" access only, permits no hunting or fishing or other activities inappropriate to the historic site.

On the basis of the cooperative agreement, the BLM provided materials and design for a trail into and around the Coves. The materials were placed and the trail constructed by Church volunteers from the Riverton and Casper areas of Wyoming. The BLM reviewed and approved the interpretive signs in the Cove and have been very cooperative in the construction of the facilities on their property.

During the time the Church has had access to the Cove, it has received annual inspections from the BLM as well as from the State Historic Preservation Office and it has received high marks. The BLM has been cooperative in permitting treks across its land from Sixth Crossing west to Rock Creek or segments thereof. On behalf of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints I want to thank the BLM officials in Wyoming with whom we have worked these past several years. They are capable, dedicated professionals who have been excellent to work with.

### **Mormon Handcart Visitors Center at Martin's Cove**

In addition to the trail, the Sun Family homestead was renovated into a Visitors Center to tell the story of the Martin's Cove site. Visitors are first introduced to the story of the trail, the history of the handcart companies and at the end of the tour there is a short video based on a journal written by Heber McBride who was 13 years old when he came through with the Martin Company and found his father frozen to death under a wagon. Those who wish are then provided handcarts to be pulled several miles to the base of the Cove. Leaving the handcarts at that point, visitors can follow another trail through the Cove. Upon returning to their handcarts they are provided yet another trail to a handcart bridge back across the Sweetwater crossing where they can imagine the events of young rescuers carrying weakened pioneers across the icy river.

The Church's Visitors' Center is located in what once was the original ranch house. This historic ranch was homesteaded in 1872 by Tom Sun, not many years after the era of wagon trains and handcarts ended. After nearly a year of renovation and restoration, the Sun Ranch house became the Mormon Handcart Visitors Center at Martin's Cove. Today visitors from throughout the country can come to learn about the history of this spot, and feel the spirit of the pioneers who struggled, perished, and were rescued there.

Because the Sun family once lived in and used the old ranch house, we kept a room (which we call the Sun room) as something of a family museum. The Church has maintained their tradition and we continue to display items which once belonged to the Sun family and other area ranchers in the Sun room and in the log schoolhouse next door. Nellie Sun, the wife of Tom Sun II, had a unique fireplace built using her rock collection as its basis. It contains a lot of petrified wood and Indian artifacts such as grinding stones and hobble stones. The rifle above the mantle was a gift to Tom Sun, Sr. from his good friend Buffalo Bill who spent much time here.

The central purpose of the Mormon Handcart Visitors Center at Martin's Cove is to provide an opportunity for people to know and remember the handcart pioneers who suffered there and the men who rescued them. This Visitors' Center tells the story of these heroic people. During the tour visitors may read the stories and quotes from the people who made this journey. Several artists have captured the story of these people, and their struggles and of the rescue effort. Listed there are the names of rescuers followed by the names and ages of those people of the Martin and Willie Handcart companies and the Hodgetts and

Hunt wagon companies. A wall contains names in gold to identify people who died somewhere along the trail. Following the tour, most visitors especially youth groups, pull one of over a hundred handcarts especially built to pull along the trail to the edge of Martin's Cove.

In addition to the Visitors' Center, a vehicle bridge across the Sweetwater River was constructed, parking lots created, public restrooms installed, and wells drilled. The Church has constructed a renovated, covered barn where groups can hold meetings and escape the weather if necessary. We have also constructed a chapel, a shop, new housing for Church volunteers, administrative facilities, and ranch operating facilities.

To better accommodate the public, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has developed two public campgrounds for youth visitors accommodating 500-800 each. In addition, we have built an RV campground, and a family campground. We have also built an RV village for roughly thirty volunteer couples that staff the Visitors' Center.

While these improvements have been costly, they are necessary to support the thousands of visitors who have come to Martin's Cove since the Church opened the Visitors' Center. I do not believe any other group, including the BLM, would have devoted the financial and human resources we have to establish Martin's Cove as the significant historical destination it has become. Remarkably, since the opening of the Martin's Cove Visitors' Center in 1997, we have welcomed over a quarter of a million visitors to this remote location in Wyoming. We estimate that about 91% of these visitors are our own church members.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has significant and valuable experience in handling large numbers of public visitors. So far this year alone, across the world, we have hosted over 5 million visitors at 15 distinct Church Visitors' Centers and 13 Church historic sites. All of our Visitors' Centers are administered by mature couples that serve as fulltime volunteers without pay.

The facilities at Martin's Cove were dedicated by Church President Gordon B. Hinckley on May 3, 1997 with approximately 10,000 visitors in attendance. In his dedicatory prayer, President Hinckley said; "I dedicate this Mormon Handcart Visitor's Center as a place where may be taught the history of the past. May the tale of the great migration of people be here remembered and spoken of with love. May all who come here do so with a spirit of reverence, as they recall the experiences of their forebears may a spirit of solemnity rest upon them." Following the dedication of the Visitors' Center, officials of the BLM dedicated the trail into the Cove.

### **Unsuccessful attempts to acquire Martin's Cove via Land Exchange**

From earliest planning President Hinckley has expressed a goal for the Church to obtain in fee the sacred ground in Martin's Cove from the Federal Government. To that end, the officials from the Church's farm and ranch real estate arm, visited the Lander District Office of the BLM in 1997 to propose acquisition of the site. We were told that land could not be purchased and that the only possible way to acquire it would be to find another site of "equal historical value" to be acquired by the Church and traded for the land in Martin's Cove.

On review of the sites then available, it was obvious that few equivalent sites were available. The emigrant trail from one edge of Wyoming to the other was explored to find equivalent sites. Two were identified: the Sixth Crossing of the Sweetwater and the Burnt Ranch at the last crossing of the Sweetwater. Several other sites were considered however, none of these were considered by the BLM to be equivalent.

After several months of negotiations, the ranch at Sixth Crossing was acquired from Tom Abernathy by exchange. The property is approximately 5,000 acres including 3,000 acres in the Sweetwater Valley from Highway 287 at Sweetwater Station northwest along the river. Almost all emigrants going to California, Oregon and Utah crossed the Sweetwater at this site. In the vicinity of this site, the Willie Handcart Company was rescued in 1856 by the party sent out from Salt Lake City by Brigham Young.

Later in 1999, the Church proposed to trade the BLM, acre for acre, land in the vicinity of Sixth Crossing and conditional public access at both Martin's Cove and Sixth Crossing for the land at Martin's Cove. The proposal for this exchange was turned down by the BLM. While the BLM has expressed interest in exchanging Martin's Cove for the Sixth Crossing site, understandably, the Church considers this Sixth Crossing site equally significant to our religious heritage. We wish to retain and develop it as another

location where the public can interpret and appreciate the historical events which transpired there. In 2000, the Church made an offer to the owners of Burnt Ranch to acquire their place and after lengthy discussions, the offer was turned down. After lengthy discussions, our Wyoming church members sought help from their congressional representatives.

#### **H.R. 4103- The Martin's Cove Land Transfer Act**

I again want to thank Rep. Hansen and the other members of the Congress for responding to the request by thousands of Wyoming Church members for assistance in drafting a bill to permit The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to purchase the sacred ground of Martin's Cove directly from the government for fair market value. H. R. 4103 contains important safeguards for the public.

The Church will be required to pay fair market value calculated on the historic value of Martin's Cove. Since the Church has been very active in acquiring other historic sites in Wyoming including the Sixth Crossing Site and Rock Creek Hollow, I can assure you the price we will pay for Martin's Cove will exceed what most Wyoming ranchers would pay for BLM rangeland. The Church bought the Sun Ranch, not for its value as a cattle ranch, not for hunting and fishing, or for mountain biking or rock climbing; but rather to obtain access so the public can walk into Martin's Cove, a site that is both historic and sacred. The Martin and Willie episode was probably the most tragic, yet at the same time the most heroic single event in Mormon pioneer experience of the Nineteenth Century. It is a story that deserves telling and retelling. That is our purpose in wanting to acquire Martin's Cove.

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